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Nutrition, Weight Control and Fast Food

EMPLOYED HOMEMAKER



Texas Agricultural Extension Service
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Nutrition, Weight Control and Fast Food

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The Fast Food Trend

More people are eating fewer meals at home and more snack-type meals at fast food restaurants. Fast food sales in 1978 in the United States were just under \$19 billion, a 12 percent gain over 1977 sales. By 1980, sales from fast food outlets serving hamburgers, fish and chips, tacos or fried chicken will be \$24.1 billion compared to \$12.8 billion in 1975.

Consumers select a fast food chain when eating out 60 percent of the time. This trend is a result of more women employed outside the home, a higher per capita disposable income and more leisure time. Although they may cost more than the same meals prepared at home, fast food restaurants allow efficient use of eating time.

The Impact of Fast Foods on Nutrition

Nutritionists are concerned about the impact of fast foods on the diet. Three factors determine this impact: how often one eats at a fast food restaurant, the nutritive value of foods served by fast food restaurants and the foods selected by the consumer.

Frequency of Eating Fast Foods

Many employed Americans eat at fast food restaurants on a regular basis. Although the fast food industry has a high total volume of sales, most consumers eat out only once per week. One meal a week would not have a serious effect on the nutritive value of the entire diet. However, some people may eat out three meals per week and fast foods even have replaced the traditional school lunches in some areas.

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The Nutritional Value of Fast Foods

Certain nutrient deficiencies could result if more than six meals a week are fast foods. Vitamin A may be limited because of the small amounts of fruits and vegetables offered on the menus. However, hamburgers which have a limited amount of lettuce and tomatoes provide some valuable nutrients. Calcium is also lacking because milk or milk shakes are not selected by the consumer as frequently as soft drinks. Calcium and Vitamin A are the nutrients least often consumed in amounts equal to one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA). Fast foods generally are good sources of protein, thiamin, riboflavin and calories because of the meat group and bread-cereal group foods often included.

Research in the Washington, D. C. area in July 1976 demonstrated that seven meals from the same chain and corresponding meals prepared at home were similar in nutritive value. Five of the seven restaurant meals provided one-fifth or more of the U. S. RDA of protein, riboflavin, thiamin and Vitamin C.

None of the meals furnished much Vitamin A, since vegetables in the usual "hamburger place" are limited almost to french fries and small amounts of lettuce and tomato on hamburgers. The meal with milk shake exceeded one-fifth of the U. S. RDA for calcium. This indicates that more of some nutrients and less of others are provided.

Thiamin values were consistently lower in "fast food" hamburgers, though riboflavin values were higher. Protein levels in homemade hamburgers were higher, probably because of the amount (2 ounces) of ground beef used.

Fat levels in the restaurant meals were not excessive. The percentage of food energy provided by fat was less than 35 percent. In all but one of the fast food hamburger meals, fat provided less than 42 percent of the calories, the average in most U. S. diets. The "fast" fillet of fish sandwich used over 1 tablespoon of mayonnaise-type spread and the apple pie—more crust than fruit—contained more fat than the home-prepared product.

The non-fat dry milk base of the fast food restaurant shakes provided considerably more calcium than the shakes made at home from whole milk and ice cream. The french fries prepared at home supplied more Vitamin C than the restaurant product, depending upon the variety of potato, storage conditions and the method of preparation.

The fast food meal provided more than the recommended calorie allowance, assuming a daily allowance of

around 2,600 calories. By eating a large hamburger (540 calories), a vanilla milk shake (325 calories), regular french fries (210) calories) and an apple pie (300 calories), a total of 1375 calories, a person on a low calorie diet could exceed the calories allowed in one day. Women and children, who have lower energy allowances, need to be aware of the higher calorie content of these meals.

Menu Selection

Fast food menus may offer a wide variety of foods rich in various nutrients. However, poor selection by consumers may lead to a diet deficient in nutrients or with too many calories.

Consumers can have a balanced daily diet by selecting the recommended number of servings from the four food groups. This will insure that all the family members are eating the recommended amount of nutrients without an excess of calories.

Weight Control

Special meal planning should be done by those on weight control programs since many fast foods are high in calories. This will prevent consuming too many calories.

Eat light morning and evening meals if planning to eat at a fast food restaurant at noon. The following tips also help cut calories.

Select broiled or grilled meat. If it is breaded and fried, remove the breading. Order the smaller hamburger on the smaller bun instead of ordering the larger hamburger. If ordering the larger one, eat only one-half the bun.

Many hamburger restaurants add generous servings of lettuce, tomatoes, onions and pickles to the hamburgers. These add nutrients and a minimum of calories.

Some fast food restaurants are adding salad bars because of consumer demand. To cut calories, select one that includes this choice. Oil and vinegar is a good low calorie dressing.

Avoid fried potatoes or onion rings.

Drink skim milk or skimmed buttermilk instead of whole milk for a good calcium source with lower calories. Avoid drinking milk shakes. One cheese slice on a hamburger adds calcium without excessive calories. Orange juice is available at some fast food restaurants and is high in Vitamin C as well as low in calories. Diet beverages, coffee, tea or water may be a good choice. Avoid adding extra cream or sugar to these low calorie beverages.



Avoid thick tartar sauces or mayonnaise-based dressings. One tablespoon contains considerable fat and about 50 calories. Use mustard for flavor without adding calories.

For further weight control suggestions, refer to Extension publication L-1453 *Be Wise - Control Your Weight*.

Fast Food - Here to Stay

When families elect to eat at a fast food restaurant, the remainder of the day's food should provide the recommended amount of nutrients without an excess of calories. Popular fast food restaurants are a convenience that can save the employed homemaker's time without sacrificing nutrition if foods are chosen wisely.

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